

# Corelli's *Concerti Grossi*, Opus VI: Bridging Tradition and Innovation in the Baroque Concerto

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## Abstract

This paper explores the significance of Arcangelo Corelli's *Concerti Grossi, Opus VI*, in the development of the concerto form during the Baroque period. Its primary purpose is to analyze how Corelli's *Concerti Grossi* influenced the structure and style of subsequent instrumental compositions, particularly within the concerto genre. The research method includes a historical and stylistic analysis of the work, drawing on musical scores and secondary literature, such as the studies by Marc Pincherle and Peter Allsop, to assess Corelli's contributions to music theory. And the data reviewed focuses on the musical structure, particularly the alternation of fast and slow movements, the incorporation of French and Italian stylistic elements, and the role of instruments such as the viola. Key findings suggest that Corelli's *Concerti Grossi* were pivotal in shaping modern concerto forms, blending influences from both Italian opera and French music, while also showcasing innovations in orchestration, expressly through the use of the viola. Moreover, Corelli's work laid a foundation for future composers like Bach and Vivaldi. This paper concludes that *Opus VI* represents a crucial turning point in the evolution of the concerto, combining traditional structures with innovative approaches that significantly impacted the Baroque music landscape.

## Keywords

Arcangelo Corelli, *Concerti Grossi*, Opus VI, Baroque concerto form

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## 1. Introduction

This part introduces Arcangelo Corelli, highlighting his significant contributions to Baroque music, particularly in the development of violin sonatas and concertos (Nicholas, 1994). Corelli's *Concerti Grossi*, Opus VI, is considered a precursor to the modern concerto form. As he aged, Corelli became more focused on creating high-quality works, and it was only later in life that he deemed this collection "perfect" and "publishable." The section also emphasizes Corelli's influence on the wider public and how he blended elements of Italian opera into his *Concerti Grossi*, laying the groundwork for the concerto genre's evolution.

## 2. Arcangelo Corelli's Background

Arcangelo Corelli (17 February 1653 – 8 January 1713) is renowned for his exceptional violin performance and compositions. As an Italian composer and violinist who thrived during the 17th century, Corelli dedicated his life to the creation of instrumental works, particularly for stringed instruments, and to the advancement of music theory. He played a crucial role in the evolution of instrumental music, and his contributions are widely recognized for their significant impact on the development of contemporary sonata

and concerto forms. This paper will specifically examine, his *Concerti Grossi*, Opus VI, a collection of *Concerti Grossi*, that exemplifies his influence in this genre.

## 2.1 Focus on *Concerti Grossi*, Opus VI

Corelli's *Concerti Grossi*, Opus VI, is a collection of twelve concerto grossi that is regarded as the forerunner of the modern concerto form. This collection represents the culmination of Corelli's compositional efforts. As he advanced in age Corelli became more increasingly aware of importance of producing high-quality works for the general public. Consequently, it was not until he was nearing the end of his life that he deemed this work is “perfect” and “publishable.” This sentiment is evidenced by the extended intervals between his compositions: His first set of works, 12 Sonate da Chiesa, was published in 1681. It was separated by only a three-year gap before the release of 12 Sonate Da Camera, Opus II, and 12 Sonate da Chiesa, Opus III. However, following his fourth work, 12 Sonate Da Camera, the interval between his third and fourth works increased to five years, and between the fourth and fifth works extended to six years. His final collection, 12 *Concerti Grossi*, came out in 1714, twelve years after his fifth work, 12 Suonati a Violino e Violone o Cimbalo. Notably, this collection was published by his students one year after his passing (Corelli, 2000).

The concerto has its origins in the late 16th century, where it initially denoted the opposition or competition between two entities. In Peter Allsop's (1999) book, “*Arcangelo Corelli: New Orpheus of Our Times*”, he noted that “The association of The term with opposition and clear out is supported by firm historical evidence dating from the late sixteenth century; for Ercole Bottrigari in his *Il desiderio* (1594) specifically defined the 'concerto' as 'contention or contrast' 1999:139). Corelli's *Concerti Grossi* exemplifies the concerto genre, featuring movements performed solely by the orchestra, akin to interactions found in opera. In addition to his fifth and seventh tracks, the remaining ten include one or two solo and orchestra movements. For instance, the melody of the Allemanda in the 10th concerto is presented in the solo violin (see Example 1), which comprises the first five bars of the Allemanda. It is evident that the parts played by the first and second violins, as well as the cello in the concerto grosso, correspond precisely to the roles of violin I, violin II, and violoncello in the concertino. The viola, while contributing additional harmony, does not play the melody. Notably, the concerto does not feature an entire movement performed exclusively by the orchestra.

Example 1: A. Corelli. (1680a): *Concerto grosso in C major, Op. 6, No. 10 (concerto da camera) II. Allemanda, bar 1-5*

II. Allemanda

Allegro

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system consists of three staves: Violino 1 concertino (top), Violino 2 concertino (middle), and Violoncello concertino (bottom). The second system consists of four staves: Violino 1 concerto grosso (top), Violino 2 concerto grosso (middle-top), Viola (middle-bottom), and Basso concerto grosso (bottom). The Violino 1 parts in both systems play the main melodic line, while the other instruments provide harmonic support. The bottom staff of the second system includes fingering numbers for the Violoncello/Basso parts.

## 2.2 Purpose and Structure of the Paper

This paper aims to analyze Arcangelo Corelli's *Concerti Grossi*, Opus VI, highlighting its role in the development of the modern concerto and its stylistic innovations. It explores how Corelli blends Italian opera and French influences in his compositions.

And it is structured in three parts: the introduction covers Corelli's life and his contributions to music, the second section examines the formal and stylistic features of his *Concerti Grossi*, and the third section discusses the lasting impact of his work on later composers.

## 3. Structure and Stylistic Influences

This section explores the structure and stylistic elements of Corelli's *Concerti Grossi*, Opus VI. It discusses how Corelli's work deviates from traditional trio sonatas by featuring alternating fast and slow sections, similar to early Italian operas, particularly the Venetian style. The section highlights Corelli's innovative use of orchestration and solo movements, as well as his integration of dramatic contrasts. Additionally, it examines Corelli's potential influences, such as Alessandro Stradella's symphonies and the French musical style, particularly the French overture, which impacted the rhythmic and thematic structure of his compositions.

### 3.1 Corelli's *Concerti Grossi* Opus VI: Structure and Innovation

The *Concerti Grossi* composed by Arcangelo Corelli are widely regarded as exemplary works within the genre. However, there is a common misconception that Corelli is the original creator of the concerto form. In his book, "Corelli: His Life, His Work", Marc (1956) asserts, this should suffice to nullify the assertions of those who, relying on the dates of publication, see in Torelli the true creator of the genre to which Corelli is then said to have given its brilliance that while Torelli may have been the originator of the concerto, it was Corelli who significantly advanced and refined the genre.

The inspiration for Corelli's *Concerti Grossi* is believed to have originated from the concerts of Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni. Corelli, who was among the cardinal's favored musicians, relocated to Modena in 1689 and subsequently became a member of the court. Prior to this, Alessandro Stradella had left behind several templates for *Concerti Grossi* in his two compositions titled "Sinfonie a Piu Lstrumenti," which feature a substantial number of instruments. Following Stradella's death in 1682, these manuscripts were bequeathed to Ottoboni's library. Both of these works are frequently performed at events hosted by Ottoboni, suggesting that Corelli may have drawn inspiration from them.

### 3.2 Italian Opera and French Musical Influences

#### 3.2.1 Impact of Italian Opera

Reverting to the compositions themselves, the entire genre of *Concerti Grossi* is devoid of any traces of the traditional trio structure (slow, fast, slow). It exhibits a greater degree of fragmentation than Corelli's own Trio Sonata, which appears to be based on an earlier operatic framework. Upon listening to his *Concerti Grossi*, one will observe that the alternation between fast and slow sections is quite characteristic, if not somewhat capricious. In his first Concerto Grosso, Corelli selects Largo as the opening theme but transitions to Allegro after only eleven measures. This is followed by two measures of Adagio, then eight measures of Allegro in a fugue style after the Adagio. The Prelude ultimately concludes with six measures of Allegro, one measure of Adagio, eight measures of Allegro, and finally three measures of Adagio, culminating in a finale. This structural pattern bears a striking resemblance to that of early Italian opera. Historically, early Italian operas can be categorized into two primary schools: the Venetian and the Neapolitan. The operas that Corelli emulated predominantly reflected the Venetian style, wherein the fast sections were typically orchestrated, while the slow sections featured solo performances by singers. The creation of a dramatic atmosphere is achieved through the continuous alternation of these two motifs, akin to the contemporary area. Corelli adeptly transformed this concept into an entirely instrumental form. It is plausible that his experiences in Venice significantly influenced this compositional approach. While it is nearly impossible to assert that Corelli was directly exposed to Venetian opera definitively, the widespread popularity of this

genre in Italy and across Europe during that period suggests that he likely drew some inspiration from it in the creation of his work.

### 3.2.2 French Music Influence

There was another individual who had a significant influence on Corelli's work: Lully, an Italian-born French composer and ballet dancer. In the 1660s, Lully established a new genre of music known as *comédie-ballet*, which integrated elements of theater, comedy, incidental music, and ballet. In this context, he wrote many ballets. Corelli's works incorporate various elements of the French overture derived from Lully's ballets. For example, in the ninth piece, *Preludio* (Example 2), he employed the traditional continuous dotted rhythm of the French genre in the first three bars, a hallmark of Lully's style. In the third composition (Example 3), the *Largo* at the outset and the *Allegro* that follows are both derived from the same thematic material; however, they are executed at contrasting tempos, with the former being performed slowly and the latter at a quicker pace. The piece commences with a slow tempo to present the theme before transitioning into the more rapid thematic material, which exemplifies the structure of a typical French overture. Furthermore, the 3/4 meter and faster speed of the *Allegro* in the fourth composition (Example 4) are also similar to French marches. This stylistic connection is also closely related to the final movement of Jacques Aubert's (1735) *Violin Concerto No. 3 in A* (Example 5), which exemplifies the conventions of a standard French march.

Example 2: A. Corelli (1680c): *Concerto grosso in F major, Op. 6, No. 9 (concerto da camera) I. Preludio, bar 1-4*

Concerto in F Major, Op. 6, No. 9  
for Strings and Basso continuo  
I. Preludio

Largo

Example 3: A. Corelli (1680b): *Concerto grosso in D major, Op. 6, No. 4 (concerto da chiesa) IV. Allegro, bar 1-10*

IV.

Allegro

Soli Tutti

Example 4: J. Aubert: *Violin Concerto No.3 in A major. Presto, bar 1-16*

**Presto** (♩ = environ 92)  
TUTTI

An alternative explanation posits that Corelli was significantly influenced by French music during his time in France. In several of Rousseau's narratives, it is asserted that Corelli's fame on the continent can be largely attributed to his trip to Paris at the age of 19. Corelli was probably exposed to a diverse array of French musical styles, which contrasted markedly with the music he had previously known in Italy. Furthermore, during his stay in Paris, Corelli elicited jealousy from Lully, who subsequently expelled him from the city. Notably, Lully had already established a considerable reputation by that time, and Corelli's removal from Paris ultimately resulted in favorable publicity for him.

### 3.3 The Viola in Corelli's Compositions

Furthermore, the frequency and duration of viola usage in Corelli's compositions were atypical for the period, as it had previously been employed infrequently in the works of other composers. Only a limited number of composers had formally integrated the viola into their works. However, Corelli not only incorporated the viola into his scores but also elevated it to a central role within the works, in contrast to its treatment by earlier composers, who often regarded it as an afterthought. In earlier compositions, the viola typically played only a few notes throughout the piece, or functioned merely as a metronomic element.

## 4. Conclusion

Corelli was a pivotal figure in Italian music during the Baroque period, and his instrumental compositions have served as a model for subsequent generations of musicians, including renowned composers such as Bach and Vivaldi. His influence is particularly evident in the development of sonatas and concertos. Corelli's *Concerti Grossi*, which draw inspiration from traditional Italian Baroque opera, utilize conventional Italian operatic writing techniques in their structural divisions. Some concerto elements are also used into some of the single-movement pieces as well. Furthermore, Corelli's lovely travels to France enriched his compositions with French musical influences. His *Concerti Grossi*, Opus VI, represents a collection of pieces that adhere to traditional structures while simultaneously exhibiting boldness and innovation. In many respects, this collection laid a significant foundation for the evolution of the modern concerto.

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